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ABSTRACT

Only a longitudinal study, in which retrospective reports can be verified against data collected earlier, can determine what topics tend to be reported accurately and whether certain types of individuals are more likely to be accurate reporters. A representative sample of women who became mothers 50 years ago are now part of the oldest and longest continuing longitudinal study of adulthood and aging. Subjects (N=44) were first interviewed in 1928-1929, again in 1945-1947, and again in 1968-1969. The average age at the last interview was 67.9 years. Factual questions about such topics as birthplace, education, and occupations, and attitudinal variables such as bonds and relationships with spouse, children, and own parents, were examined for consistency over time. Subject responses at each follow-up interview were compared with earlier information. Factual variables were recalled with greater accuracy than attitudinal variables, and accuracy did not diminish with age. No subjects could be described as consistently low or high in accuracy over time; no discernable pattern emerged among the group. Personality characteristics showed considerable consistency over time. The results suggest that accuracy of recall does not appear to be a generalizable trait characteristic. (Author/NRB)

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PERSONALITY AND ACCURACY OF RETROSPECTIVE REPORTS OF AGING WOMEN

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Personality and Accuracy of Retrospective Reports of Aging Women

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An unusual opportunity to examine the accuracy of aging person's recollections of events that took place earlier in their lives is reported in this paper.

Theories of personality development have relied heavily on retrospective reports for evidence of the influence of earlier events on later personality characteristics. From the time of Freud, retrospective reports have provided much of the substance in studies concerned with the role of early experience and parental functioning in personality development. Similarly, theorists of aging have necessarily placed considerable faith in data collected from old people through recollections and reminiscence. Yet we know very little about how much can be observed by the recollector/informant, or how much can be retained, or how it will be reported.

Only a longitudinal study, in which the retrospective reports can be verified against data collected at earlier times, can determine what topics tend to be reported accurately and whether certain sorts of persons are more likely to be accurate reporters.

There have been few studies of retrospective reports from persons of any age (for a review, see Field, 1979). Most of these have examined mothers' reports of events in the early lives of their children (Douglas & Blomfield, 1956;

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Pyles, Stolz, & Macfarlane, 1935; Yarrow, Campbell, & Burton, 1970) or the reports of young adults who were subjects of longitudinal studies (Cherry & Rodgers, 1979; Livson & McNeill, 1962; Weishaus, 1980). Besides our own, the only studies that have been able to investigate the recall of older persons have examined memory for public events (Squire, 1974), public faces (Warrington & Sanders, 1971), objects in common use (Poon & Fozard, 1978), or events of limited personal significance (Baddeley, Lewis, & Nimmo-Smith, 1979; Gekoski & Kerrigan, 1980). In spite of the obvious importance of the question, we have found no other studies that have investigated the accuracy of reports by elderly people of personal events occurring in their own lives.

The questions addressed in this paper are important: Can we know what sorts of people are likely to be most accurate in their recollections? Who can be relied on to provide true pictures of the past? Is there an association between accuracy of recall and personality? Do circumstances of present lives affect recollections of the past?

In 1935, Honzik (Pyles et al, 1935) reported on ten questions asked of the mothers of the Guidance Study children about the pregnancy and delivery of the infant and events of the first 21 months of the infant's life, such as birth weight, illness of the child, age first tooth appeared, and age walked alone. She found considerable accuracy: some women were more accurate than others, but there was no pattern to this accuracy. If, for example, a mother recalled the weight of the baby correctly, this was no indication that she would be correct in her recall of her own health in pregnancy or age of walking.

Forty-five years later, in 1981, we can report that the level of accuracy of these women has not diminished in old age. Also, it is still true that some women are more accurate than others, though not always, and there are no discernable patterns to this accuracy or inaccuracy.

Method

Subjects

Our sample of mothers constitute a representative sample of the young women who became parents of babies in Berkeley, California, more than 50 years ago (Macfarlane, 1938). These babies became the subjects of the Guidance Study at the Institute of Human Development, University of California, Berkeley, and their contribution to our understanding of child development is incalculable (Jones, Bayley, Macfarlane, & Honzik, 1971). The parents, originally studied because of their relationship to their children, have recently come to be seen as persons of great interest in their own right (Field, 1981a; Kuypers, 1974; Maas & Kuypers, 1977; Mussen, Eichorn, Honzik, Bieber, & Meredith, 1980), and are now recognized as part of one of the oldest and longest continuing longitudinal studies of adulthood and aging.

These mothers were interviewed intensively when their children became part of the Guidance Study, and they themselves were young adults (YA), in 1928-1929; again when they were middle aged (MA) and their children were 17 years old, in 1945-1947; and when their children were 40, and they were young-old (YO), in 1968-1969.

Forty-four women who were interviewed at all three times are the subjects of this study. They were close to 70 at the last interview, on average 67.9, with a range of 59 to 77. Although they are a favored group in some ways, still they are broadly representative of surviving persons of their age. Every educational livel is represented, including one Ph.D. Few of them worked, but the occupations of their husbands ranged across the Holligshead scale. All of the group still live in California, and 80% live within a one-hour drive of the city where their children were born more than 50 years ago--a stable population. Their average IQ in young-old age is 115, normally distributed around this high mean.

Scores and Ratings

Twenty-four factual questions, such as birthplace, education, and occupation of the mother, her husband, and her parents, and 23 attitudinal, affect-laden questions, such as bond and relationship with spouse, children, and own parents, were investigated for consistency over time. These questions are shown in Table 1.

It must be emphasized that we are not considering actual changes over time, as, for example, in the relationship between mother and child, but rather we are comparing the mother's first and second report of the same relationship at an earlier time. In some instances we are comparing later reports with primary records obtained from observations or hospital records.

Accuracy scores. The replies given by each woman at each of the follow-up interviews were compared with information gathered earlier. Each woman was scored for consistency of report over all three time comparisons: the retrospective reports made at 45 (MA) about events occurring at 30 (YA), those made at 70 (YO) about events at 45, and reports at 70 of events at 30, as well as the reports made at 30 about the pregnancy and early months of infancy. In addition, we were able to compare reports of each woman's childhood made when she was 30, 45, and 70. Each of the three time comparisons was subdivided into factual, attitudinal, family of origin, and current adult family, as shown in Table 1. These subdivisions were examined separately and in combination. For example, was a woman more likely to be consistent in reports about her early family life? Were there women whose attitudinal reports were above average in consistency? For each of the 12 comparisons, the women were rated as high in accuracy if they were above the average of the group in that comparison.

Personality characteristics. A number of ratings of personality had been made in conjunction with each of the interviews (Maas & Kuypers, 1977; Macfarlane, 1938). They include 21 ratings of mothers' characteristics that were made in YA and again in YO, simple but reliable ratings, for example, of

energy, talkativeness, poise, cheerfulness, self-esteem, and mental alertness. There were also 12 ratings of personality characteristics judged to be of importance for family relationships, such as irritability, placidity, or demonstrativeness that were made in young adulthood and again in middle age, shown in Table 2. Finally, Q sorts (Block, 1961) were made in young-old age.

Demographic and Family Ratings. In addition, other ratings were used to assess the "state" or circumstances of each woman in the areas of marital adjustment, relationship with child, and relationship with own siblings, as well as information about education, occupation, IQ, and health. We were interested in the association between these variables and the accuracy of reports about earlier relationships and earlier facts. For example, do women who enjoy good marital relationships report more accurately about husband's birthplace, education, occupation, financial status and earlier marital adjustment? Do women who see a great deal of their siblings in old age recollect the events of childhood more consistently? Women were scored as high in each of these states, such as marital adjustment, if they were above the mean for the group in each rating. These high and low groups were compared on the accuracy of their reports of past events in the same area.

Analysis

Product-moment correlations were used to examine the association between accuracy and personality and other ratings. In addition, women who were more accurate were compared by t-test with those who were less accurate on personality characteristics. Women who were higher than the mean of the group on each of the predictor "state" variables were compared with those who were lower on each of the recall variables of Table 2. Difference scores were found for the recall variables, and these were coded as (1) in agreement at both times, (2) better at the later time, or (3) worse later, and 2 x 3 contingency tables examined the differences found. Chi-square or phi coefficients were used to look for significant associations.

Results

As is commonly found in retrospective studies, factual variables were recalled with greater accuracy than attitudinal, affect-laden, variables. Factual variables about the respondent were found to be more consistent than those about the spouse (Field, 1981a).

Accuracy of recall did not diminish as these women grew older. Whether the reporter was middle aged or in young-old age, or whether the recall was over 17, 23, or 40 years, the quality of recollections was maintained. Average correlations for the three comparisons were .558, .554, and .643 (Field, 1981c).

However, it is not possible to describe any of these women as consistently low or high in accuracy over time. There is no individual who was above the mean of the group in all comparisons, nor is there any one who was below the mean in all comparisons. There were women who had few scorable answers; there were those who tended to answer a high percent of the questions. Both of these groups had members who were high and low in accuracy. Although factual variables produced higher agreement than attitudinal variables, no women were found who were consistently high or low on either of these types. Nor, when family of origin and current family questions were examined was it possible to find women who were consistently high or low on either of these types. There is no discernable pattern among this group of healthy, intelligent, well motivated women, even though the recollections are of important past events in their own lives.

The correlation between accuracy in MA and accuracy in YO was only .27 for factual variables and .01 for attitudinal variables.

Nonetheless, we compared the more accurate and less accurate women on the three groups of personality ratings. No association between personality characteristics and consistency of recall could be found. Although there were some significant findings, they were just at the level one would expect by chance.

Personality characteristics show considerable consistency over time.

Mussen et al (1980) reported consistency in ratings of intellectual and personality traits over 40 years with these same women. Table 2 shows other personality ratings made of these women in YA and MA, and these also show consistency over 12 to 17 years. In both these sets of ratings some were situation-specific, such as "nagging" (r = -.34) or "tense or worrisome" (r = -.04), and these had low correlations over time. Others, reflecting enduring traits, such as "energy level" (r = .35) or "nervous stability" (r = .52) showed strong consistency over time.

The state variables, representing the circumstances in which these women found themselves at the time of the recall, also were examined for effects that these states might have on reports about the past. Once again, we found no pattern. Once again, the number of significant associations was just about that which would be predicted by chance. There is no discernable relationship between present circumstances of these women and their recall of relevant events of the past.

Accuracy of recall is not significantly correlated with ratings of health, either in MA (r = .24) or in YO (r = .06). Intelligence, as measured by the WAIS in YO, is only modestly correlated with accuracy in the factual realm (r = .37) and not at all associated with attitudinal accuracy (r = -.13). Ratings of cognitive functioning are not significantly associated with accuracy in MA (r = .17) or in YO (r = .07). Even immediate memory, measured by the WAIS digit span test, is not associated with accuracy (r = -.06).

Discussion

This does not mean that we cannot depend on what people say. We must emphasize that these women are, for the most part, quite accurate in their recollections. If one asks, however, whether a person who is accurate at one time or about one topic will be accurate at another time or topic, the answer is that we cannot predict. Accuracy of recall does not appear to be a general-

ized trait characteristic or trait but is idiosyncratic.

Patterns in recollections have been found in other parts of this study of retrospective reports. We know, for example, that there is a highly significant increase in reports of the happiness of childhood: more and more people recall their childhoods as happy at each succeeding interview. We know that other recollections of childhood also are remembered more optimistically for those individuals whose happy childhood reports increase. None of the present adult state variables, however, are associated with the happy childhood reports (Field, 1980).

We know also that if one compares the recollections of couples, and the study includes 28 husbands and wives married more than 40 years, it is found that they are more likely to agree on their memories of their child than about their own marital adjustment (Field, 1981b).

We know that there are systematic changes in the reports of what was enjoyed--or not enjoyed--earlier in adulthood: for example, old people are more optimistic than they were in middle age (Field, 1981c).

But when it comes to predicting which sorts of people are more likely to agree with their own earlier reports of their pasts, we don't know. Haggard, Brekstad, and Skard (1960) reported that mothers were not consistent in the accuracy of their reports from one group of scales to another. Honzik earlier stated that "mothers show no general tendency to give accurate or widely discrepant reports on all items" (Pyles et al, 1935). These findings of recall by young women of events concerning their children are consistent with those reported in this paper on recall by elderly women of many different topics from the past. There is consistency in these findings of inconsistency.

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Table 1

List of Variables

Indicating when Information on Each was Gathered

FACTUAL	YA	MA	YO	ATTITUDINAL	YA	MA	YO
				Family of Origin			
birthplace	*	*	*	bond with Mother	*	*	*
position in family	*	*	*	relationship with Mother		*	*
church raised	*	*	*	change relationship		*	*
Father birthplace	*	*	*	bond with Father	*	*	*
Mother birthplace	*	*	*	relationship with Father	*	*	*
Father education	*	*	*	change relationship		*	*
Mother education	*	*	*	Father's stamina	*	*	*
Father occupation	*	*	*	Mother's stamina	*	*	*
Mother occupation	*	*	*	marital adjustment parents	*	*	*
Parents separate	*	*	*	intellectual home	*	*	*
Father death		*	*	happy childhood	*	*	*
Mother death		*	*				
				Current Family			
age at marriage	*	*	*	marital adjustment at YA	*	*	
spouse age marriage	*	*	*	bond with child at YA	*	*	
spouse birthplace	*	*	*	relationship with child, YA	*	*	
number children	*	*	*	bond with child at MA		*	*
number boys	*	*	*	relationship with child, MA		*	*
number girls	*	*	*	raise child similarly		*	*
education	*	*	*	want college?		*	*
spouse education	*	*	*	finance at YA	*	*	*
occupation at YA	*	*	*	finance at MA		*	*
occupation at MA		*	*	income worker involvement		*	*
spouse occup. YA	*	*	*	social adjustment YA	*	*	
spouse occup. MA		*	*	social adjustment MA		*	*

Table 2

Correlations of Personality Measures

Made in Young Adulthood and Middle Age

Rating	r
Nagging	-.34
Child disliked or favored	-.32*
Kind of discipline	-.24
Tense or worrisome [a)]	-.04
Selocitousness	.11
Energy level [a)]	.35*
Irritability [a)]	.37*
Overprotectiveness	.40 *
Brutal	.42 *
Social Adjustment [a)]	.48 *
Nervous stability	.52 **
Emotional tone of family	.56 **

Notes: * = $p < .05$

** = $p < .01$

a) = ratings made when child was an infant and again when child was 17 years old. All other ratings were made when child was 5 years old and again when child was 17 years old.